End-Life Crisis in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*

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Abstract

The essay focuses on the end-life crisis in two plays by Edward Albee, *The Sandbox* (1960) and *The American Dream* (1961) and investigates the contexts of this crisis through the figure of Grandma and her means of encountering age and death. I will use age studies and the close reading of the two dramas in order to see the ways in which Albee's senior citizens challenge mainstream constructions of aging by reconnecting with their pasts in various ways on their deathbeds. They build up an idiosyncratic "age autobiography" (to use Margaret Morgenroth Gullette's term) in an inventory of events and feelings by assessing a complete(d) life. By doing so they achieve an "agewise" (Gulette) identity that comes full circle in the very moment of grace.

Keywords: *Edward Albee; 'The Sandbox'; 'The American Dream'; Grandma; agewise; age autobiography; ageility; age; death.*

1. Introduction. Aging and Edward Albee's Plays

The essay deals with the tropes of end-life crisis, namely aging and death, in two American dramas by Edward Albee: his 1960 chamber piece *The Sandbox* and its subsequent coda, *The American Dream* written in 1961, in order to investigate the negotiation end-life crises through specters of age and means of encountering death. Both plays were conceived and produced at the beginning of the sixties by a writer that excelled in the depiction of controversial themes, including the representation of age. My aim is to see in what ways the representation of the senior citizens in these dramatic plots is challenging mainstream cultural constructions of aging during a period of crisis towards the end of life.

As Philip C. Kolin writes, Albee's one-act plays, including *The Sandbox*, "called America to be self-reflexive" in a turbulent decade in which "the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, the Watts riots in Los Angeles, the Vietnam War, and the Stonewall protests of gays and bisexuals would all force the nation to confront its failings" (Kolin 2005: 17). But unlike other Albee's other plays of the sixties, *The Sandbox* focuses on a dual theme that was rather unheard in the American plays of the sixties: crisis pertaining to aging and death (Cristian 2020: 124). Interestingly, the same theme of aging and death appears also in Albee's play that he wrote a year after *The Sandbox*, namely in *The American Dream*, which seems at first to be an "outlandish cartoon" on a dysfunctional nuclear family and their traditional values of marriage and parenting (Gussow 1999: 139) but proves to be about "the breakdown of language" (141) for two critical moments in life: birth and death. The character connecting these two plays – and in which the two dramas practically converge – is Grandma, who is not only a character that is old and ready to die but also a "devilish, daft" figure and, paradoxically, even a "constant source of amusement" (139). Her figure is based on the playwright's own Grandmother Cotter, the only person with whom he could "find sanctuary and share a laugh" (140) as an adopted child.

In my reading of these two dramas, I will primarily follow the approach to aging and identity as described by cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gulette, who was among the first to call for a distinctive age or aging studies in the 1990s (qtd. in Bouson 2016: 6), following immunologist Élie Metchnikoff's idea of aging and longevity from *The Prolongation of Life. Optimistic Studies* ([1908] 2004) and, among many other writers in various fields, Simone de Beauvoir's opinions from her quintessential but largely neglected book *The Coming of Age* (1970) by challenging the so-called "regimes of decline" or narratives of decline (Gullette 2011: 5) and strategies of ageism. The term "ageism" was invented in 1969, a year after the term "sexism" appeared. According to

Gullette ageism should be regarded in its plural form of "ageisms" (Gulette 2017: xviii), rather than its singular form – a term coined by Robert Butler, the first director of the American National Institute of Aging in 1969 – because it contains prejudice and is one of the worst verbal discrimination forms towards the old people (Cristian 2020: 124).

Furthermore, Gulette claims that

> [N]aming and shaming go together. […] Naming discrimination against people with disabilities as "ableism" changes the status and identity of people with disabilities. Targeting "ageism" instead of our own "aging" does heavy lifting on behalf of everyone alive, and positions old people to enjoy the accomplishment of making it so far so well. (Gullette 2017: 202)

Previously, Gullette had stated in *Agewise. Fighting the New Ageism in America* that Americans in the twentieth century, especially the so-called Boomer generation "generally didn't pay serious attention to ageism or even notice its precocious spawn, middle-ageism"; moreover, most Americans thought "there never can be a 'golden age' for older people" but, as the cultural critic continues to see it despite this grim context, "aging-into-the-middle-years, or aging-into-old-age, or even aging-past-youth, can be better or worse depending on social context" (Gullette 2011: 5). Furthermore, she claims that "[W]hatever happens in the body, and even if nothing happens in the body, aging is a narrative. Each of us tells her own story. But most of us lack an adequate backstory" and that story is what Gulette coined as "age autobiography" (5). Age autobiography is thus a new genre of life golden age storytelling that is endowed with critical revelatory characteristics (Cristian 2020: 125).

This is exactly what I aim to explore in my readings of the two Albee dramas that deal with the imminent presence of crisis as old age and death: during the course of an end-life crisis I will follow the age autobiography, ageility and the agewise constructions in the case of

Albee's Grandma characters, who enact an idiosyncratic strategy that help them encounter the grand finale.

"Agewise," an umbrella term coined by Gullette, comprises a series of attitudes and strategies that confront "trends and symptomatic events in this new expanded U.S. ageism that have been concealed or misrepresented or underreported even though they do increasing violence to essential aspects of well-being" (Gullette 2011: 8). In other words, an agewise attitude is a certain constructive self-awareness that develops in later stages of life. The two dramas I chose for analysis are eloquent artistic examples of how several forms of ageisms work in the western, youth-oriented culture when advanced aged women arrive at the end of their lives and how they fight against societal prejudices through various strategies. The crises thus appear when these aged women fight the discrimination, the bigotry and the preconceptions of their cultural contexts. Albee's Grandmas are such characters that represent best modes of agewise journeys through a period of end-life crisis, enhanced by their final creative potential (Cristian 2020: 125).

2. Ageing and End-Life Crisis in *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream*

The Sandbox. A Brief Play, In Memory of My Grandmother by Edward Albee had its first performance on April 15, 1960 in the Jazz Gallery, New York City. According to Mel Gussow, this play along with *The American Dream* (1961) were inspired by his childhood experience with his parents and his grandmother (Gussow 1999: 152). *The Sandbox*, however, was one of Albee's favorites; it was a piece the playwright called "an absolutely beautiful, lovely, perfect play," which was written for (and about) his grandmother, Grandma Cotter, his closest relative, the one member of the family with whom he had formed a lasting attachment. A crotchety and very amusing woman, she considerably brightened Albee's childhood and was a natural ally against his mother (her daughter) – and everyone else. When he left home, his one regret was having to leave Grandma Cotter behind. She died in 1959 at the age of eighty-three before her grandson's first play was produced in New

York. Still estranged from him, his parents did not tell him of his grandmother's death, and he missed her funeral. He found out later, from "spies in the house of love, so to speak," that is, from a secretary in his father's office. (Gussow 1999: 135)

The Sandbox grew out of a reconceived play, *The Dispossessed* (written around 1959 and 1960), which was initially titled *The American Dream*. The text of this drama was partially ready when Gian Carlo Menotti requested a "short piece for the Festival of Two Worlds" in Spoleto, Italy; so, Albee "took the characters of Mommy, Daddy, and Grandma from *The American Dream*, turned the Young Man into a kind of Angel of Death, put them on a beach, and presto, *The Sandbox*" (Gussow 1999: 135). A year later, *The Sandbox*'s twin play, *The American Dream* (1961) premiered in New York. This "outlandish cartoon" portrayed, similar to its precursors, *The Dispossessed* and *The Sandbox*, a dysfunctional American family, with Grandma, the oldest member of the cast as a "devilish, daft" figure and as a "constant source of amusement" – and wit (Gussow 1999: 139). While in *The Sandbox*, she is the protagonist of the tragic text, in *The American Dream* she is the gravitational center of the drama. In the "Preface" to *The American Dream*, Albee sets the parameters of this thespian text by claiming that

> the play is an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. [… The play] is a picture of our time – as I see it, of course. Every honest work is a personal, private yowl, a statement of one's individual's pleasure or pain; but I hope that *The American Dream* is something more than that. I hope that it transcends the personal and the private, and has something to do with the anguish of us all. (Albee 1966: 21-22)

The Sandbox adheres to all these criteria but, unlike *The American Dream*'s consumerist opulence, it was conceived to be played on a minimal, "bare" stage with two simple chairs set side by side and a "large child's sandbox with a toy pail and shovel"; its background "is the sky, which alters from brightest day to deepest night" (Albee 1963: 8), prefiguring someone's long day's journey into eternal night. The characters of the play include a glacial Daddy and a callous Mommy – portraying the playwright's mother, Frances Albee, who was a model for many of his characters including *The American Dream*, *A Delicate Balance* (1966) and *Three Tall Women* (1991). They escort Grandma to her last act into a grave-like sandpit, with the Musician and the Young Man assisting in the process. Daddy (aged 60) is described as a small, gray, thin man; his wife, Mommy (aged 55), is a well-dressed, imposing woman (Albee 1963: 8). Their names, according to the descriptions in the script, are "empty of affection," pointing to the "pre-senility and vacuity of their characters" (8), whose implicit ageism is imminent in their own fear of endings. According to Philip C. Kolin, this play encapsulates "familiar Albee targets as anti-Momism, hollow rituals, failure to communicate, sterile couplehood, complacency, and hypocrisy" (26). Among these quasi-hollow characters, Grandma (aged 86) stands out: she is the play's protagonist and Mommy's mother, a "tiny, wizened woman with bright eyes" (Albee 1963, 8), the most dynamic of all characters. Besides them, the play features the Young Man (aged 25), nicknamed the Angel of Death, who is a "good-looking, well-built boy in a bathing suit" (8) doing calesthenics that suggest the "beating and fluttering of wings" (9) along with the Musician, whose nondescript age suggest also a young man; these two young men are the ones providing real affection and true care for Grandma in a sterile, consumerist world, devoid of sentiments and burdened with meaningless regulations (Cristian 2020: 127).

At the beginning of the play, Mommy and Daddy arrive to a non-descript beach that seems for them to be the perfect location to place Grandma to rest. "There's sand there – and the water beyond" (Albee 1963: 9), Mommy says. The play's sandy beach setting has a double denotation: it stands for a playground and a burial ground, and connotes Grandma's infantilization, who is taken there to die. As a disobedient child, the elder woman is, as the stage directions show, "borne in by their hands under her armpits; she is quite rigid; her legs are drawn up; her feet do not touch the ground; the expression on her ancient face is that of puzzlement and fear" (Albee 1963: 10-11). This condescending, ageist attitude suggests that the couple actually acts against Grandma's wishes when she is unable to touch ground anymore. In a dehumanizing act, Mommy and Daddy discard their disabled parent by putting her into a sandbox to shovel sand on herself – and so they push the responsibility of dying to her alone. Realizing this, Grandma decides not to communicate with them more than a baby does: she screams and groans "Ahhhhhh! Ah-haaaaaa! Graaaaaa!" (Albee 1963: 12). Her onomatopoeias sound as a "cross between a baby's laugh and cry," indicating the tragi-comic nature of her dead-end situation. This lack of communication provides the generative moment of the plot: terminally disabled, Grandma realizes this is the end of her day(s) but her productive subjectivity manages to make it less uncanny by playing a trick on those present (Cristian 2020: 127-128).

Motionless and distant, Mommy and Daddy watch Grandma's agony and wait patiently for her to stop moving; as foreseen by Albee, their communication is empty of meaning and lacks any ceremonial traits. The couple's attitude suggests that this is yet another mundane act devoid of any ritual content. Resisting sentimentality and knowing that she will not get any reaction from her family members, the protagonist suddenly undercuts theatrical illusion, breaks the fourth wall and starts to talk directly to the audience (Kolin 2005: 27), complaining about how Mommy and Daddy treat(ed) her. With this metadramatic turn, she adopts her audience making them instant relatives and participants in her play(ground). Moreover, with a keen awareness of her situation, Grandma makes herself not only visible (by shoveling sand) but also heard (by screaming and groaning) and understood by all, when she finally speaks out, summarizing her life in terms of relationships and lack of respect towards the old:

> GRANDMA: Ah-haaaaaa! (Looks for reaction; gets none. Now… directly to the audience) Honestly! What a way to treat an old woman! Drag her out of the house… stick her in a car… bring her out here from the city… dump her in a pile of sand… and leave her here to set. I'm eighty-six years old! I was married when I was seventeen. To a farmer. He died when I was thirty […] I'm a feeble old woman… how do you expect anybody to hear me over that peep! Peep! Peep! (To herself) There is no respect around here. (To the YOUNG MAN) There's no respect around here! (Albee 1963: 13-14)

Grandma's succinct age autobiography contains a kind of conscious ageility. The term was coined by Leni Marshall when the critic was writing on the convergence of disability and age studies (Marshall 2014: 33). Conscious ageility derives from the term of "conscious aging," defined by Margaret Cruikshank in *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging* (2003) and from the idea of "disability" connected to it, meaning aging-awareness of disabled people together "with an understanding of one's self-identity and social identity as variable, and with an appreciation for the possibility that the self can remain whole even as it changes" (Marshall 2014: 33). Indeed, as Marshall emphasizes,

> people with disabilities mark their bodies as aging more quickly: their bodies are temporally beyond a cultural norm. In this formulation, Otherness is coded as aged-ness. Conversely, elders may try to maintain their connection to the cultural norm of able-bodied-ness in an effort to stave off the Otherness that they code as disability. (Marshall 2014: 23)

The idea of old age as "Other" was brought into critical discourse by Simone de Beauvoir, who described advanced age as a "forbidden subject," a "shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention" (Beauvoir 1972: 7, 10). In this context, ageility thus connotes a double Otherness that materializes in the ageility of Grandma caught in her near-death moment. Quickly realizing her hopeless situation, she overcomes the emotional dimensions and the limitations of her own body and age in an absurdist turn: by embodying the defensive mechanism of feigning death, she freezes (Cristian 2020: 129).

On the part of her dysfunctional family there is no sense of loss, sorrow or grievance at all – as if Grandma was just another dispossessed object to be safely deposited in a proper place; their congratulatory support is coined as "brave" before they leave the internment ground. However, after her family leaves, Grandma finds herself totally paralyzed. As two end-of-life psychologists, Robert A. Neimeyer and James L. Werth write, death triggers "despair, paralysis or defensive avoidance, on the one hand, or some form of acceptance, affirmation or even meaning on the other" (Neimeyer and Werth 2005: 388). Realizing this dead-end, she agewisely accepts Young Man's quasi-memorial service and the Musician's music (who continues to play as the curtain slowly comes down). These two thanatic interlopers reconceptualize end-life intimacy: they act as if they were Grandma's children. They also provide Grandma with skilled nursing and with an atmosphere of trust and love, taming – with their hospice service and palliative care – her rite of passage. This moment is similar to what psychologist Elizabeth MacKinley describes in her study on death and spirituality as a "unique, spiritual journey" (MacKinley 2005: 399) and a "successful negotiation of a final identity that gives retrospective meaning to life and prospective meaning to death (396). During sand shoveling, Grandma recounts her life as part of her larger age autobiography and realizes her new agewise stance when she says that "I am *smart that way*." (Albee 1963: 15-16, emphasis added). Grandma's conscious ageility and her final, agewise attitude makes the departure ceremony a serene voyage into afterlife, uplifting the entire event from an uncanny act to the elevated level of sublime love (Cristian 2020: 130).

In *The American Dream*, Albee went to a dehumanizing degree beyond what Eugene Ionesco did in *The Bald Soprano* (1950) with the characters. The unnamed couple in Albee's play is simply depicted, "in the American tradition" (Gussow 1999: 140). They call each other

Mommy and Daddy, as in *The Sandbox*, and do not have any children because they have mutilated and killed their previously adopted ("bought") child. As consciously trained consumers, Mommy and Daddy want their money back from the Bye-Bye Adoption Service (represented by Mrs. Barker), from where they bought a child in the past. This was a process of "commodification of human flesh (the child) for the parents' financial justification or satisfaction," thus making the play an absurdist portrait of the "depravity of consumerism" (Kolin 2005: 31). Although Albee himself disliked being called an absurdist playwright, Martin Esslin coined him so exactly because of the sense of "loneliness in an alien world" he constructed through his characters he conceived in the fifties and sixties and especially through the "image of the dream child which exists only in the adoptive parents' imagination" (Esslin 1965: 22).

Grandma in *The American Dream* is the only figure escaping absurdist dehumanization. By remaining a sensitive human being, she lingers as a complete alien to her surroundings. She is there physically but mentally she lives in a distant past, in her well-packed boxes of memories. As a result, Mommy and Daddy's home becomes no more for her than a temporary "human warehouse," or rather an enormous box where she can live for a while but where "seniors are transformed into lifeless parcels" or "unwanted possessions to be carted off" by van men (Kolin 2005: 30). In line with the image of boxes, Grandma appears accordingly, "loaded down with boxes, large and small, neatly wrapped and tied" (Albee 1966: 28) with these packages functioning as "metonymy for her wear-dated existence" (Kolin 2005: 30). These parcels contain items of her own age autobiography, which Grandma sees as "not much" because neatly as they appear to be, these cases contain only

> some old letters, a couple of regret… Pekinese… blind at that… the television… my Sunday teeth… eighty-six years of living… some sounds… a few images, a little garbled by now… (Albee 1966: 57).

Besides these items, Grandma's old age life is also patterned by how her daughter and her husband live. The extreme consumerist couple seems to live in an endless moment of crisis, always longing for more things around them. Their mundane trials affect Grandma's days as well since she is also forced to witness this condition. She is thus dragged into a crisis which is not her own but is imposed on her. Although the play does not emphasize any reason behind Grandma's continuous packing of boxes (besides her traumatic past when she was poor and used to put things in boxes to cover the lack of things), it is clear that she is fed up with her family, their way of life and plans her departure by packing her boxes as metaphors of suitcases prepared for long-term travel.

While waiting for their consumerist satisfaction, the would-be parents of *The American Dream* symbolically repeat the scene of their previous child-purchase and, by doing so, invent a fictional "van man," who is supposed to take Grandma away if she does not behave properly (that is, the way Mommy and Daddy want her to). This "van man" functions as the thanatic Young Man in *The Sandbox*, who is a caring angel of death. With the invention of the "van man" the couple renews their attempt to fictionalize another child in the family but they do now know that this new character, who appears accidentally on the set, is the Young Man (whom Grandma immediately takes for the "van man") and who, at the end, surprises Mommy and Daddy with his appearance. He is "almost insultingly good-looking in a typically American way" (Albee 1966: 51) who "ought to be in the movies" (51) – just as the angelic Young Man in *The Sandbox*. The young man in *The American Dream* is the impersonation of an ideal person, of the American Child, embodying the national ethos along with a set of ideals conceived as the American Dream. Moreover, the young man bears a striking resemblance to the dismembered child of Mommy and Daddy (Cristian 2006), which makes him a perfect mirror-image and replacement for the previous one.

In the context of various consumerist exchanges, the infantilized Grandma is obviously a burden for the Mommy-Daddy couple, but

Daddy has "no intention of putting her into a nursing home" despite the fact that Mommy wishes "somebody would do something with her" (Albee 1966: 31). Grandma senses this and she prepares, in an act of conscious agility, to evaluate her situation of crisis in the family and to escape from a house that she does not feel any more her home. Her escapism starts with words: her sentences make up a veritable encyclopedia of the old, a structured mirror – in words – of her own ageility. She smartly equates old age with that of childhood, knowing that "old people are just as vulnerable as children" (Kolin 2005: 30). In addition, Grandma continues to assemble her own boxes of memory into clusters of her age autobiography when she talks about "old people." Nevertheless, by distancing herself from this age group, she manages to remain objective and with a clear vision of her own age, which makes her a genuine agewise person.

Grandma describes her physical condition in terms of fragile metaphors of sugar and ice and criticizes those who complain about age and its disability – as not to fit in the stereotyped, mainstream cluster of the old. She believes that

> [O]ld people aren't dry enough, I suppose. My sacks are empty, the fluid in my eyeballs is all caked on the inside edges, my spine is made of sugar candy, I breathe ice; but you don't hear me complain. Nobody hears old people complain because people think that's all old people do. And that's because old people are gnarled and sagged and twisted into the shape of a complaint. (Albee 1966: 38)

Moreover, her age autobiography is completed with acoustic metaphors illustrating even the most intimate geriatric physiological processes and psychological states of which she is conscious when she says that

> [O]ld people make all sorts of noises, half of them they can't help. Old people whimper, and cry, and belch, and make great

> hollow rumbling sounds at the table; old people wake up in the middle of the night screaming, and find out they haven't even been asleep; and when old people are asleep, they try to wake up, and they can't… not for the longest time. (Albee 1966: 31)

Grandma's age autobiography is bordering on self-confession and includes a spectrum of perceptions, containing also olfactory hints. She claims that old people "are very good at listening; old people don't like to talk; old people have colitis and lavender perfume" (Albee 1966: 33) but overall, they "have a right to talk to themselves; it doesn't hurt the gums, and it's comforting" (34). By rightly assessing her condition, in an agewise attitude she moves beyond the crisis of her age and family context and, within the realm of a talking and working cure, she aptly describes her situation while sending her boxes with the van man for the final departure. She does not think of her age as one of crisis but rather embraces it as a comic act or a humorous episode which she can overcome by playing communication tricks on others. While the Grandma of *The Sandbox* lacks a communication strategy, the Grandma of *The American Dream* is a cunning one and subverts all forms of communication to her advance with an ageility strategy when she claims that

> GRANDMA: […] I've gotten so old. Most people think that when you get so old, you either freeze to death, or you burn up. But you don't. When you get so old, all that happens is that people talk to you that way. […] When you're old you gotta do something. When you get old, you can't talk to people because people snap at you. When you get old, people talk to you that way. That's why you become deaf, so you won't be able to hear people talking to you that way. And that is why you go and hide under the covers in the bog soft bed, so you won't feel the house shaking from people talking to you that way. That is why old people die, eventually. People talk to them that way. (Albee 1966: 29)

Sensing a change is needed in her family, Grandma, as an old, agewise deus ex machina, sets up the stage for the young man as "van man," when he arrives in their house and asks him to stay. The young man is willing to play his act in this new context and this comes handy for Mrs. Barker from the Bye-Bye Adoption Agency, too, as she can send a fat check for a substitute child (now a grown-up person) she actually never provided for the Mommy and Daddy. This way Mrs. Barker can have her business done, Mommy and Daddy can have their own child secured and the young man can finally have a family where he belongs. With this arrangement done catharsis is granted for (almost) everyone: with a child in their family, Mommy and Daddy will not miss Grandma (who silently disappears from their world) and the acknowledgement of her absence grants the old lady a quiet exit from a late-life crisis, which she made into a comic episode – or, at least, with a sense of (American) happy ending.

The new nuclear family of three (Mommy, Daddy and Young Man) thus celebrates with Mrs. Barker the beginning of a new life circle, a domestic new American Dream, of which Grandma is not willing to be part anymore and which she only witnesses from the metadramatic position of an eavesdropper that moved out of the scene – and life:

> MOMMY [moving to the tray]: So, let's—. Five glasses? Why five? There are only four of us. Why five?
> YOUNG MAN [catches GRANDMA's eye; GRANDMA indicates she is not there]: Oh, I'm sorry.
> MOMMY: You must learn to count. We're a wealthy family, and you must learn to count.
> YOUNG MAN: I will.
> MOMMY: Well, everybody take a glass. [They do.] And we'll drink to celebrate. To satisfaction! Who says you can't get satisfaction these days! (Albee 1966: 60)

With an authentic agewise game plan, Grandma steps out of her family's grotesque sitcom which, for the remaining characters, remains to be assessed as yet another American Dream in the chain of dreams about America. There is no end-life intimacy for her, like in *The Sandbox* since the Young Man substitutes her in the family statistics. Finally, Grandma's age autobiography is completed with her absence from the family celebration. Moreover, in her soliloquy-epilogue, she manages to even tear down the fourth wall and sheds light on the genre of the play by letting the Veblenian conspicuous consumers believe the dream they dream (or think they live). She also withdraws her fictional status in life into the night of an end, which is the end of the play itself.

> GRANDMA [interrupting… to audience]: Well, I guess that just about wraps it up. I mean for better or worse, this is a comedy, and I don't think we'd better go any further. No, definitely not. So, let us leave things as they are right now… while everybody's happy… while everybody's got what he wants… or everybody's got what he thinks he wants. Good night, dears. (Albee 1966: 60).

Conclusions: End-Life Crises as Challenges to Ageist Perspectives

Albee's *The Sandbox* and *The American Dream* show representations of end-life crisis that challenge ageist perspectives in a decade when few art forms dared venturing into discussing the tabooed, controversial subject of the end-life crisis, of aging and death. Albee's plays illustrate the ways in which a dramatic character that reached late-life experiences her own, personal understanding of ageility to exit according to their newly acquired knowledge. In discussing William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Ellen Matlok-Ziemann claimed that "old age and frailty can be conceived of as a harmonious part of being in the world" (Matlok-Zieman 2014: 260). These two American dramas written on the apprehension of mortality subscribe to this sentence because they portray surprising strategies achieved by the protagonists' agewise attitude before they leave the stage of their lives (Cristian 2020: 136).

In *The Sandbox*, Grandma realizes her inability to move and confines herself to the absurdist playground (emphasis added) she was placed in by her family members. She participates in a quasi-ceremonial farewell staged by two strangers, a Young Man and the Musician, who faithfully accompany Grandma on her last day till the end of her syllables. Grandma's lost autonomy puts her in a farcical situation that questions the idea of self-reliance and individual independence by subscribing to the decline narratives of old age and even in her last hours of her stage tenure remains autonomous and in a status that gender researcher Linn Sandberg calls in her recent work, "affirmative old age" (Sandberg 2013: 11) by emphasizing her active nature in directing the actions in the play as she packs boxes. On her deathbed, the Grandma in *The Sandbox* tells of a conscious age autobiography (the recollection of her upbringing, youth, marriage, early widowhood, parenthood and old days) in an inventory of events and feelings assessing a complete(d) life and achieving an agewise status that comes full circle in the very moment of grace (Cristian 2020: 137).

The American Dream's Grandma confesses the nature of old age (and old people) in a detailed account, an encyclopedic age autobiography about how old people live and act and, and, in an agewise turn, she also stages her own metadramatic departure from the play in an agewise condition. Therefore, she can unsubscribe from the thespian plot while drawing attention to those facets of life that are perceived as crises for others and which are actually a means of escape for her. Her end-soliloquy sheds light to the nature of the play itself: a comedy. In short, for Grandma, the American Dream is a comedy that ends where she wants to. With good decision-making skills and proper perception of people, she moves beyond the crisis of her old age and with a conscious ageility, she embraces life as a comedy worth playing till the end.

Although quite different in their dramatic plots of end-life crisis, Albee's both Grandmas seek, in Sandberg's words, a "conceptualization and acceptance of old age in all its diversity" (Sandberg 2013: 35). With their types of end-life crisis management both dramas tackle certain aspects of this crisis and, as such, contribute to the complex representation of agewise strategies and the representation of crises of the old age in American literature and drama.

Note: This essay is partially based on "Aging and Death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* and Tennessee Williams's *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*." *HJEAS* 2020, 26/1: 123-138.

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